

Revisiting Roland Barthes' *effet de réel*: an analysis of the use of insignificant details in artist's monographs and monographic museums

The anti-authorial criticism voiced in *La mort de l'Auteur* is probably Roland Barthes' most direct attack on the traditional life-and-work format of the artist's monograph. The essay has become - together with Foucault's *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* – the seminal text for any discussion of authorship. Yet, several other of Barthes' writings contain just as critical positions throwing the artist's monograph into suspicion for other reasons, but they are rarely brought to bear on it. In this paper, I would like to discuss Barthes' concept of the 'reality effect' and apply it to the artist's monograph and to the monographic museum as two instances of art historiography.

While *La mort de l'Auteur* radically questions the author's authority over the interpretation of a work, the *L'effet de réel* essay (1968) affects the artist's monograph because it questions the status of 'reality' in realist literature, historiography or biography. Barthes argues that realist literature or historiography achieves a sense of reality not thanks to some heightened degree of objectivity, but thanks to formal characteristics of their texts, namely an employment of over-detailed descriptions. Some of these details obtain a clear significance in the overall narrative but others – Barthes calls them 'détails inutiles' – have an apparently contingent presence in the text and merely serve to provide the text with an impression of reality: *l'effet de réel*. Yet, concrete details occupy a critical position since too much detail can make the narrative, and thus meaningfulness, collapse. The concept of a reality effect thus opens onto the abyss of a contingent material reality which can only be given sense through an imposition of (conventional) narrative structures, such as those of an artist's biography.

To clarify the agency of the reality effect in life-and-work narratives, I will analyze a couple of passages of artist's monographs and distinguish between *significant* and *insignificant* – but reality enhancing – details. A parallel analysis will also be made of different museal stagings of artist studios, a typical situation in which the materiality of the real provides more than a reality effect and might begin to challenge monographic narration.